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C O N F I D E N T I A L AMMAN 006232

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN FORCES CAPTURE FUGITIVE EXTREMIST BEHIND
NOVEMBER 2002 MA'AN UPRISING

REF: AMMAN 05333

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

1. (U) Capping a ten-month manhunt, Jordanian security forces on September 27 captured one of its most-wanted fugitives, local Islamic extremist Muhammad Ahmad al-Shalabi (aka Abu Sayyaf), and an accomplice, 'Umar Ghazi al-Bazayi'ah, in the northeastern town of Mafraq. Charges against al-Shalabi range from plotting terrorist attacks against U.S. and Jordanian interests to inciting armed clashes with security forces in the southern city of Ma'an, al-Shalabi's hometown, in November 2002.

2. (U) Al-Shalabi is one of 13 individuals--known locally as the Mafraq cell--charged with plotting attacks against US and Jordanian targets in December 2002 (ref). The arrests occurred one day before their trial in absentia for their alleged involvement in this plot was to begin in the State Security Court.

3. (C) The government accuses al-Shalabi of leading a gang of "armed bandits" that instigated clashes with police in the southern city of Ma'an last November, resulting in six dead, including two police officers, the wounding of many others, including Ma'an's police chief, and the destruction of property. The clashes began when al-Shalabi resisted police efforts to interrogate him in the aftermath of USAID official Laurence Foley's assassination in October 2002. Al-Shalabi was not listed among the perpetrators of the Foley assassination prosecuted by the GOJ, and we know of no information linking him to that event.

4. (U) Information Minister Nabil Sharif said that security forces arrested al-Shalabi and al-Bazayi'ah "in a clean and successful operation that did not witness any shootings or injuries." Press reports indicate that the situation in Ma'an was quiet the day after news of al-Shalabi's arrest broke.

5. (C) Comment: Ma'an, an economically deprived and conservative southern town whose people rely heavily on the trucking trade between Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq, has been the scene of four violent episodes between local townspeople and government forces since 1989. The fighting in November 2002 sparked debate within Jordan about the government's handling of the situation. The arrests bring to a close the intense manhunt and one chapter of this ongoing saga, but unease over this rebellious town will continue.

6. (C) The GOJ has not made public the details of al-Shalabi's role in the Mafraq cell plot against U.S. and Jordanian interests. The detainees probably will appear before the Security Court once their interrogation is complete and at that point, more details about the charges probably will be released.

GNEHM